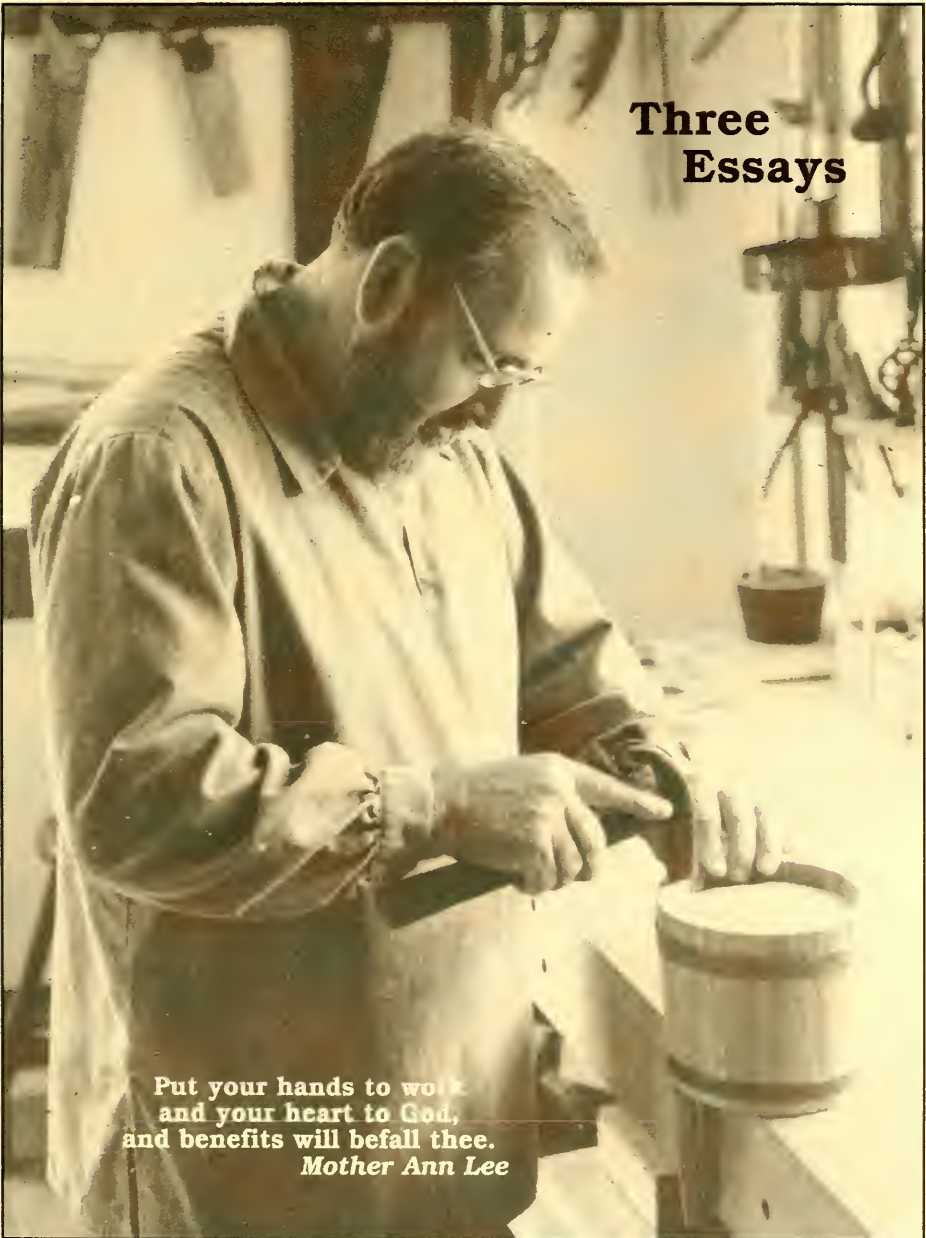


# IN THE SPIRIT OF SHAKER



## Three Essays



Put your hands to work  
and your heart to God,  
and benefits will befall thee.  
*Mother Ann Lee*

**John C. Campbell Folk School  
of Brasstown, NC**

with

**The North Carolina  
Humanities Council**

*Makes You Kindly Welcome*

**IN THE SPIRIT  
OF SHAKER**

A week of Shaker lectures, discussions,  
films, exhibits, and food

with

**Jean M. Burks**

*Curator*

Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont

**Thomas D. Clark**

*Professor Emeritus*

University of Kentucky, Lexington

**Susan Schwartz**

*Church Musician*

Rockville, Maryland

**November 8 – November 14, 1998**

Photographs: Courtesy of Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky

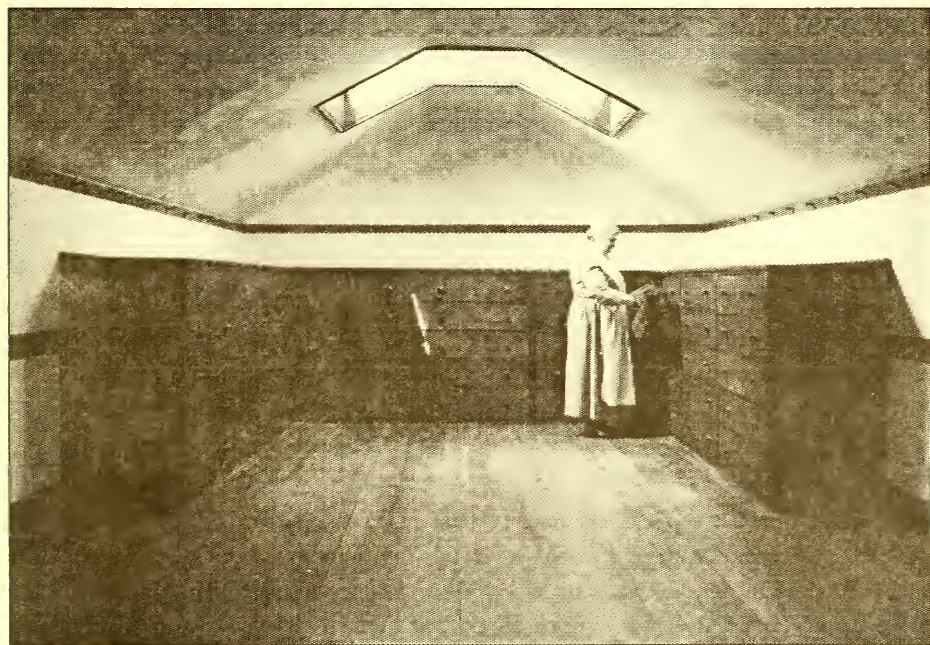
# SHAKER TEXTILE PRODUCTS

*Jean M. Burks*

Shaker-made textiles for family use and for sale to "the world" as they called non-believers, encompass a wide variety of traditional and specialty fibers, processes and products.

Through the mid-nineteenth century, flax for linen was grown in all Shaker communities. As linen processing is extremely time consuming, by about 1850 it was replaced by cotton. With the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, cotton yarn was available commercially. Consequently Shaker communities purchased finished cloth rather than producing it themselves.

From their founding in the early nineteenth century many communities had large flocks of sheep and the carding, spinning, plying and weaving of wool was an important manual activity. Later these processes were; completed by machine as water or steam power became available. Aside from linen, cotton and wool, the Shakers also made good use of specialty fibers, both local and imported, to produce an unusual variety of finished goods. Silk was harvested, dyed and woven into cloth by the Shakers of South Union, Kentucky and used by the northern communities to make clothing accessories. Palm leaf was imported from Cuba to create fans, table mats and bonnets. The most unusual textile put into service by the brothers and sisters was the "useless" wood from the poplar tree. Through a very labor-intensive process it was cut, dried, and woven into a cloth web which was cut to size and sewn into boxes for sale to the world during the 20th century.





This discussion will focus on the specific textile products of the Canterbury, New Hampshire Shakers which basically fall into four categories - household, clothing, fancywork and the Hart and Sheperd industries. The information has been gleaned from diaries and journals, candid Shaker photographs and interviews I conducted with living Sisters Ethel Hudson and Bertha Lindsay in the late 1980s.

### *Household Textiles*

While fabrics used in the dwelling houses and shops include linen towels, white cotton sheets and pillow cases in a plain or twill weave, none of these patterns was particular to the Shakers. They did, however, personalize these communal textiles by embroidering the abbreviated building name on each piece to facilitate sorting, distribution and storage. Wool and cotton cloth seating was an important early Shaker activity. The idea of interleaving woven fabric strips together possibly originated with the Shakers wound 1830 and is the forerunner of today's lawn chairs with webbed seats. They replaced the more traditional splint and rush and were colorful, comfortable, durable and easily to install.

### *Clothing*

When Shaker societies were first organized they brought with them into the community both the garments and fiber processing skills from the people who lived around them. As time went on, however, some general characteristics emerge that reflect a conscious Shaker aesthetic. While the rest of America adopted new fashions regularly from 1810-1860, the Shakers clung to styles with so little change over the years that, by midcentury, they were considered hopelessly old-fashioned. Like many other religious groups, they wanted to promote a sense of union and brotherhood by dressing alike; discourage vanity by dressing modestly; and distinguish themselves from the outside world by wearing clothing that was clearly different, and, in this case, out of date, from their neighbors.

Shaker characteristics emphasize structural or loom controlled designs that result from the materials or the processes used to put the textile together rather than relying on embellishments that have been applied later. There is a sensitivity to symmetry and balance and patterns tend to repeat in a regular fashion. Both in the visible and not so visible parts of the garments attention is paid to finishing details, which reflects the Shakers sense of perfection and honesty of construction. Finally, the believers used simple but rich colors, with the exception of yellow; perhaps, because it is very fugitive and the least practical.

From the 18th century, an important part of the sister's costume was a square piece of material folded cornerwise and worn as a shawl modestly draped over the shoulders and pinned across the chest. At first these were made of cotton and linen, but as early as 1832 the Shakers of South Union, Kentucky produced colorful neckerchiefs of silk. It was a very laborintensive process to raise the silkworms, feed them, unwind the cocoons, and then dye and weave the cloth on hand looms. According to Canterbury Shaker records, Trustee David Parker visited Kentucky in 1856 and brought every sis-

ter in the Church family a white silk neckerchief and every brother a white silk handkerchief as a gift from the South Union believers.

By 1875, the silk neckerchief had given way to an oval cape which covered the shoulders and fell to the waist called a Bertha. It was a semicircular garment that buttoned up the front, rather than being pinned and was trimmed with velvet, fringe or ruffles which drew the eye downward to the waist. The Berthas could be the same fabric as the dress beneath or made of silk.

Bonnets in a sugar scoop shape were worn from the early 19th century. By 1827 they were made of palm leaf imported from Cuba, hand-woven on looms and lined with cloth. Due to the shortage of palm leaf in the 1860s, the sisters began to use locally grown rye or oat straw instead. The process of gathering, cutting, boiling, drying, bleaching, splitting, and weaving the straw as well as assembling, shaping and lining the bonnet was a labor intensive process. As in the case of the silk neckerchiefs, there was a spirit of sharing products between villages. The Canterbury sisters provided bonnets for themselves as well as for other communities, such as Sabbathday Lake, in Maine.

Aside from practical purposes, clothing gives insight into the Shakers leisure time activities. Beginning in the 1890s, on a regular basis Canterbury sisters wrote and performed entertainments of a religious nature for their Shaker family and worldly visitors in the chapel. Many candid photographs from the period show the performers to be clothed in a variety of innovative, homemade costumes.

### *Fancywork*

In addition to household textiles and clothing, the Canterbury Shakers made “fancywork” goods for sale—a term which means grade A, quality goods, rather than ornamented items. By the early 20th century when there were fewer men in the community, the Shaker sisters supported the village through their handiwork and sale of small goods to the world. They followed published sample books of patterns and instructions to produce dolls, wreathes, hat brushes, drawstring bags, pot holders, pin cushions, sewing kits, pen wipes, and aprons, to name a few items. The industrious sisters sold their products both at home and in worldly markets and traveled in pairs for several weeks at a time to resort beaches and hotels throughout New England as well as urban centers as far away as New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, the Carolinas and even Florida. The profits made from the sale of these seemingly trivial items was substantial. From 1890-1900, they realized net profits of \$3,000 a trip for a total of \$130,000 over the ten year period.

In addition to these small, individually made handicrafts, the Canterbury Shakers operated an unusual trade in poplar wood from 1893 to 1958. These “poplarware” production items could only have been made in a community with a spiritual base where the sisters had abundant time to perform this laborious process, were able to work together in an assembly line manner and had the patience to use the available materials. The process began by cutting down five poplar trees a year which grew on site

as a “useless wood.” They were trimmed at the sawmill to produce 18” by 2” by 2” boards. One of the brothers then planed the blocks into paper thin strips which the sisters straightened and dried in the laundry, using a mangle to facilitate the process. The strips were then cut into narrow strands 1 1/6 to 1/8” wide using a shredder and then dried on racks in the laundry. The wooden strands became the fabric weft and were woven on a two harness loom to produce a web of cloth in several patterns. The sisters either used the traditional shuttle or a pair of wooden tongs lined with sandpaper to hold the narrow poplar strands and were able to produce only three yards of finished web a day. Once removed from the loom and cut into pieces, the poplar web became the raw material for a variety of boxes and trays.

### *Hart and Sheperd Industries*

The Hart and Sheperd company-named after Shaker trustees Emeline Hart and Lucy Sheperd was formed in the 1890s to sell Shaker-made cloaks and sweaters to the world. These astute businesswomen registered the names of several of their products with the state of New Hampshire to protect their trade. Their famous cloak, called “The Dorothy”, designed by Eldress Dorothy Durgin, was simple, stylish and practical enough to appeal to the most discriminating customers, including Mrs. Grover Cleveland who wore a medium gray cloak to her husband’s second inauguration in 1893. Made of the finest imported French wool broadcloth purchased from John Wanamakers in New York City, they were offered in many different colors and used by adults, children and even infants. These graceful, lightweight cloaks were constructed with the highest quality workmanship and attention to detail. They had two lateral pockets in the front, a pleated, silk-lined hood and matching silk ribbons attached to the neck.

In addition to cloaks, the Hart and Sheperd industries were known for their machine knit goods including their trademarked “Shaker Sweaters”. Their success with machine knitting is directly related to their ability to take advantage of the most sophisticated technology available, their skill in marketing mass-produced products and the Shaker reputation for quality. The sweaters were produced on commercial machines patented in 1863 by Isaac Lamb on which a tubular as well as a flat fabric could be knit. The Shakers purchased their first machine in 1886 from the Lamb Knitting machine company in Chicopee, MA. It had individual needles that formed 4000 loops per minute making possible a variety of patterns including the Shaker created half-cardigan stitch—a form of machine ribbing which thickens the fabric. Today, many mail order catalogues such as L.L. Bean, Lands’ End and Eddie Bauer, as well as department stores, manufacture and misleadingly market their “classic” Shaker sweater which are crew neck cotton cardigans with raglan sleeves. In reality, the original Shaker sweater was very different in material, style and construction. Made from pure Australian wool, they were available in white, blue, gray, black and garnet. Although, it is not known whether the Shakers invented or adapted their patterns from the world, they produced two basic types: coat or jacket sweaters, which

buttoned in front, and pullover sweaters, all with set-in, rather than raglan sleeves and “auto,” “military,” v-neck, or turtleneck collars rather than crew necks. The most famous of their designs were the pullovers with ribbed turtlenecks, waistbands and cuffs made exclusively for various colleges including Dartmouth, Yale, Harvard and Princeton. According to one mail order brochure, they were “used by athletes, particularly in boating, baseball, etc.” Once the student earned his letter, he would sew it on his Shaker knit sweater.

The Shaker Trustees or business officers were masters at marketing the Community’s knitted products. They sold the sweaters wholesale as well as retail through sporting goods houses, the Shaker store at Canterbury and on special sales trips to hotels, beaches and mountains frequented by summer vacationers from Maine to Washington. The sweater business continued to grow until 1923 when the commercial end of the trade closed due to the unavailability of quality yarn and their difficulty in obtaining a new Lamb knitting machine.

The Canterbury Shakers prized their sweaters and archival photographs show sisters and brothers at work or at leisure wearing these popular items all year round.

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# SHAKERS: IN SEARCH OF HEAVEN

*A Personal Essay*

*Susan Schwartz*

I have always felt a longing to know about God and others who also seek the Unnameable. I was raised in the Southern Baptist tradition in Washington DC. Growing up in a liberal congregation helped form my opinions on social issues, race, feminism and a continuous wondering about God. As far as I can remember, I liked going to church and hearing the stories my Sunday School teachers taught from the Bible. I especially loved the hymns we sang every week. The stories taught me how to live and the music made me feel their power.

Sometime during my girlhood I thought I wanted to become a nun. I think I was attracted to the mystery of what I thought a nun was. The robes and rituals made me think they must understand the secret to knowing God. And there was the musical everyone had seen, “The Sound of Music,” and I was drawn to the ethereal sounds they produced. What a peace they seemed to have in their daily round.

I did not become a nun. I became a wife, a mother, a teacher, a Girl Scout leader, a singer and I am still becoming. I am a Unitarian Universalist now, aware that the



Spirit is found in many places, among many faces. I am searching for peace in my daily round and music plays an important part in my life. I work on making heavenly sounds and feel it deep within but many times the peace is elusive.

I share this because it is my desire to know God and the search for peace and balance in my life that brings me to the Shakers. Understanding my past explains much about my present circumstances- why I am the way I am- and where my future may be headed. I'm quite sure I'm not Shaker material but I feel drawn to them nonetheless. I am drawn to their story and their visions of how one can know God every day. Like the universe itself their story has been evolving since it's beginning.

Shaker history began with Ann Lee in England; 1770. Neighbors of hers; Jane and James Wardley, formed a sect of Quakerism mockingly called the "Shaking Quakers" of which Ann became a member. The trembling that occurred when they were seized by the Holy Spirit earned the groups' name. Ann was traumatized by witnessing her parents' lovemaking as she grew up in their small home. Couple this with her lower class existence and society's beliefs on purity and God's judgement and one can see how her past shaped her future. She was pressured to marry by her father and bore



four children all of whom died early in life. She was quite bold and vocal about her faith which earned her several times in prison. While in prison for disturbing the peace, Ann had a vision of God and the message was clear to her. Lustful relations were the cause of most of the world's trouble and only through purity could one be saved. In addition, everyone was to be equal, men, women, rich and poor. She saw herself as a model of Christ and set about spreading her message. Another vision, again received in prison, told her to bring the message, to America. The year was 1774 when she and eight fellow believers set sail.

Once in America hardship





continued as they sought to establish themselves while living the “true gospel”. It would be five years before they began to attract converts. From that time on the Shakers began growing in numbers and individual communities. Ann and her chief elders began traveling to establish separate communities after being imprisoned once again. They faced persecution and abuse along the way. Mother Ann died in 1784, ten years after arriving in America. Her dream was just beginning to be realized at the time of her death. The physical and emotional trials proved to be too much for her. After her death others stepped in to lead and of course as time would have it change was inevitable.

The ways of worship, dance and song made dramatic changes over the years. Specifically, dance was first a chaotic and sometimes wild affair with believers shaking, trembling, stamping and falling down to the ground. Father Joseph Meacham, one of Mother Ann’s successors, introduced a more orderly form of dance as the sect began to grow in numbers. Dance names include: square order shuffle, ring shuffle, endless chain or union dance and sacred march. These were practiced and given in worship until around the end of the Civil War. The time of dance seemed to have come and gone. Only a few hand and bowing motions remain today.

Songs also evolved from being written by few to those written by many during the Great Revival (1837-into 1850’s). This time period was known as “Mother’s Work”. Some of the first tunes were borrowed and written down. Most songs were memorized. The revival years produced many tunes inspired by visions of angels, revered persons of their time and departed Shakers. Some of these were spontaneously given during worship requiring another person to write it down. “Mother’s Work” was also responsible for gifts in the form of mystical ritual, unusual forms of worship and folk art.

Shaker history is especially interesting because in spite of all their transformation,

central truths have remained constant. "The seven principles of the church of Christ," according to "A Summary View of the Millennial Church" (1823), were, "duty to God, duty to man, separation from the world, practical peace, simplicity of language, right use of property and the virgin life." These formed the practical and external law of a life based on the twelve Christian virtues of faith, hope, honesty, continence, innocence, simplicity, meekness, humility, prudence, patience, thankfulness and charity." (Alidrews, *The Gift to be simple*). Living this "true gospel" was and is their way to experience Heaven on earth.

What must it feel like to have such a clear vision for your life? I've thought often about Mother Ann and how she came to live out her calling. Are we all given such clear messages? Do we heed the call or kill the messenger? Whether we agree with the Shaker way or not I think we must admire a woman, especially of that time, who was so compelled to live out her convictions. The Shaker staying power is a testament to the message of Mother Ann's initial vision. Even with today's dwindling number of members the fact that so many are interested in their way is telling. The vision in it's purest sense offers us something hoped for- communion with God and with one another.

In 1996, our family traveled through Kentucky on vacation, making Pleasant Hill one of our stops. Pleasant Hill was, and in spirit, is a Shaker village. I happened upon this historical village as I planned a half-way stop toward our real destination. I knew virtually nothing of substance about the Shakers, only of their vow of celibacy and furniture and Shaker box fame. This hardly defines a 200-year-old group of committed believers. What I discovered that day left me wanting to know more. There were lessons to be learned in addition to a piece of American history. My most vivid memory was the music. As I learned about that part of them I began to put all the pieces of their story together.

For the Shakers, experiencing God is a daily occurrence. I use the present tense because there are still a few, fewer than ten, Shakers left in this world. And also because for me their spirit lives on. Most of us feel fortunate to make a spirit connection on a Sunday morning or maybe while on an occasional walk in the woods. I hope for God's living presence in my life but so many times feel that life itself gets in the way. There is my family and home to tend to, work and volunteer jobs to complete before the Spirit can enter. I wait and become restless. So much of my life seems like service to others so how can peace be lacking most of the time? I paint a more negative picture than is reality. Truly I am happy but sometimes there is something missing which I cannot define. The Shakers make the Spirit connection through all they do. Life is work and worship and both are offered to God. The word gift is used often in connection with the Shakers and appropriately so. Work and worship are equal gifts offered to God and heaven is achieved in the here and now. This is one lesson I am try-

ing to learn from their vision of the gospel.

Of all the history, interesting tidbits, and appealing aspects of their lives, the music is what has touched me the most. On the day of our visit to Pleasant Hill we entered the meeting house to hear a brief talk and a sample of songs. I wonder still- was it just I who felt so deeply moved that day? One voice broke the silence beckoning us to Zion to share the Glory. A few hand motions were used to emphasize a point or show reverence and openness to God. I reminded myself that this short program was just that, a demonstration of what used to be. I tried to keep still lest anyone see my body trembling. I felt very "in the moment." This was not pretend for me but a real Spirit connection in a real Shaker meeting house. The songs were simple, the words even more so and their simplicity is what makes them so powerful even today. They speak the wisdom of the ages telling us to love God and one another.

After the program, I did not want to leave the meeting house. I would have enjoyed sitting in silence for a while watching the sun cast shadows on the plain wooden floor. I felt the need to ponder what I had just experienced. What had I just experienced? I felt embarrassed by my show of tears and uncontrollable trembling. Maybe no one noticed. I was not able to stay, so I decided to seek out a "Shaker," guide to ask about getting some of the music. I was directed to the gift store and shifted mental gears to concentrate on what books to purchase. I hid them away for the remainder of the trip. I didn't want to flip through the books like the pages of a magazine. I wanted time to really look- and see what was there for me. I felt so taken by their simplicity and focus, I knew that day I would share their story and music.

It took me a full year to study and prepare a program to share. The other duties of my life needed tending to most of the time before I could get to the music. I've tried to take some of the lessons I've learned along the way to heart. Work is not an intrusion but part of life's whole picture. My work and music can be seen in the same light. They are equally important for my life to be complete. I offer both as gifts to whom-ever will accept them, The songs are a part of me now. Like the hymns I sang as a little girl their melodies stay even when words are forgotten. They run through like the threads of a quilt, binding the pieces of my life together to make me whole. The Shaker story has become part of my own life story. How fortunate I am to have stumbled upon these committed, gifted people. The greatest lesson learned is that I need look no further than the task at hand in my search for heaven.

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Special thanks to Cindy Wilhide Styles for her editing skills and always for  
her friendship.*



# PLEASANT HILL THE GARDEN OF SHAKERISM

*Thomas D. Clark*

The Shaker experience in Kentucky paralleled the history of a region which in 1805 was rapidly emerging from a raw frontier condition. At the turn into the nineteenth century there converged in the Kentucky country an era open to the forces of politics, economy, and religion which expressed itself in the great revivals, and especially the one at Cane Ridge in 1801. The opening of the frontier to settlement, and to the spread of religion offered strong human challenges. This the leaders of the religious groups realized. Thus it was onto this frontier of emotional arousal that the disciples



of Mother Ann Lee's exploratory disciples arrived in Kentucky at just the right moment to gain a foothold on the land.

Converts such as John Dunlavy, Richard McNemar, Malcolm Worley and other "New Lights" were open to conversion. They also had the necessary frontier experience to aid in the establishment of a functional community. The establishment of a community of Shakers on Elisha Thomas' Shawnee run 140 acre farm was a successful beginning. From that rather limited beginning on the lateral Kentucky River stream proved a base of operation which enabled the Shakers to gather in converts and to expand their land hold.

Remarkably this unorthodox social and cultural religious body was able to organize and function in the midst of a resistant strong protestant orthodox region. Perhaps one of the most startling historical facts was that Kentuckians, including nearly all the early governors, were fecund people producing families of ten and twelve children. The doctrine of rule of celibacy actually contained a germ of ultimate defeat. Nevertheless the community at Pleasant Hill had the fortune of triple blessings. First, they ultimately planted their village atop a fertile land hold atop the Kentucky River plateau, second, from the beginning there developed good land management and village administration, and, third, the Shaker craftsmen were dedicated to perfection, and the herdsmen were ever alert to the great potentiality of the domestic livestock economy of the region.

Few, if any, Kentucky agrarians were so closely wedded to the rhythms of the land as were the Shakers. They became gatherers of the first order, gaining and using knowledge of the fauna on their land, sensing the responses the land made to certain modes and principles of management, and, above all, the responses the land made to industry and attention. All this required a sense and application of order. Aside from the day-to-day internal village human relationships and discipline, there is no better example of the sense of order than in the buildings raised in the village. The imagination, sense of design, and the practical adaptation and use of native materials by the youthful Micajah Burnett constitute the mark of genius. One can hardly walk through the village without sensing this fact, and certainly a detailed examination of structural features produces a confirmation.

In the workshop, whether producing farm implements or domestic vessels, the strict adherence to design, steadfastness of quality, and a practical utilitarianism gave the label "Shaker Made" a high dependability. The sense of order and care carried over into the creation of Shaker fabrics, the selectivity of garden and field crop seeds, and their marketing was a pioneering act too often overlooked by historians of the communal society in America.

In no agricultural area did the Shakers exhibit more daring in experimenting, and the seeking after quality than in the field of livestock breeding and management. This was especially true in the breeding of hogs, sheep, cattle, and work horses. As the livestock industry advanced in the Bluegrass area of Kentucky and stock sales became a



common practice, Shakers from Pleasant Hill were on hand to buy and sell prime breeding stock.

The garden of Shakerism in Kentucky had its serpents. The matter of community relationships with the outside neighbors were strained at times. The matter of withdrawals of members and disputes over property cessions created court problems. There were the "Winter Shakers" who imposed on the order. Finally the rising competitiveness of outside institutional America robbed the community of its favored position in crafts, the marketing of garden seeds, and, even, in the religious area. The period 1820-1860, may well be considered the period of most stability and order in the Pleasant Hill Community.

There came that dark moment of national disruption and the Civil War which ultimately sowed the seeds of destruction of the Society at Pleasant Hill. The Shakers were loyal to the Union, and to the political order. They observed the presidential appeal for a public thanksgiving, remained largely aloof from the slavery controversy, and certainly were pacific in their attitudes toward war.

In the summer and early autumn months of 1862 life in the Shaker community at Pleasant Hill was badly disrupted by troop movements into and through the village. There appeared the Confederate brigades and groups under the command of John Hunt Morgan, W.C.P. Breckinridge, Kirby Smith, and others. All came hungry and demanding. Then there came the federal troops. They came to camp on the village grounds, to demand generous hospitalities. For instance, the Pleasant Hill Shakers often went to bed late at night amidst hundreds of soldiers, the gear of war, and horses and mules. Then there came that bloody holocaust at Perryville on October 8, 1862. The roar of cannon could be heard in the village, and then came the wounded, the battle worn, the hungry, and the devastating demands for food, demands which exhausted the carefully garnered winter supply for the village. There followed the ever unsettling marauding guerrillas who assaulted the village.

From 1862 the fortunes of Pleasant Hill faded. A changed America, dwindling memberships, a dwindling market for garden and field crop seeds, rising American commercialism, debt, and loss of religious and leadership momentum brought about an eventual end of a historical phase of the Shaker experience at Pleasant Hill, but not before the community had carved out a vivid and lasting chapter in Kentucky's economic and social history.

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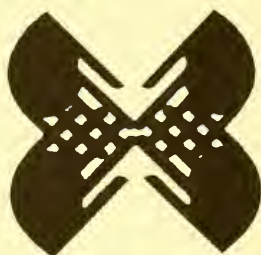
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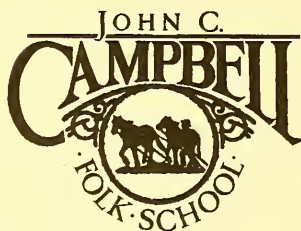


Do all your work as though  
you've a thousand years to live,  
and as you would if you knew  
you must die tomorrow.

*Mother Ann Lee*



**North Carolina  
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